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Iziko Museums of South Africa

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National Museum of African American History and Culture To Display Objects from Slave Shipwreck Found Near Cape Town, South Africa

Museum Joins Iziko Museums of South Africa and George Washington University in Slave Wrecks Research Project

CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA—Objects from a slave ship that sank off the coast of Cape Town in 1794 will be on long-term loan to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). The announcement, scheduled for Tuesday, June 2, will take place at a historic ceremony at Iziko Museums of South Africa. The discovery of the ship marks a milestone in the study of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and showcases the results of the Slave Wrecks Project, a unique global partnership among museums and research institutions, including NMAAHC and six partners in the U.S. and Africa.

Objects from the shipwreck unveiled June 2—iron ballast to weigh down the ship and its human cargo and a wooden pulley block—were retrieved this year from the wreck site of the São José-Paquete de Africa, a Portuguese slave ship that sank off the coast of Cape Town on its way to Brazil while carrying more than 400 enslaved Africans from Mozambique.

Lonnie G. Bunch III, founding director of NMAAHC, and Rooksana Omar, CEO of Iziko Museums, will join in the announcement of the shipwreck’s discovery and the artifact loan agreement.

“Perhaps the single greatest symbol of the trans-Atlantic slave trade is the ships that carried millions of captive Africans across the Atlantic never to return,” said Bunch. “This discovery is significant because there has never been archaeological documentation of a vessel that foundered and was lost while carrying a cargo of enslaved persons. The São José is all the more significant because it represents one of the earliest attempts to bring East Africans into the trans-Atlantic slave trade—a shift that played a major role in prolonging that tragic trade for decades.”

São José Wreck

The São José's voyage was one of the earliest in the trans-Atlantic slave trade from East Africa to the Americas, which continued well into the 19th century. More than 400,000 East Africans are estimated to have made the Mozambique-to-Brazil journey between 1800 and 1865. The ship's crew and some of the more than 400 enslaved on board were rescued after the ship ran into submerged rocks about 100 meters (328 feet) from shore. Tragically, more than half of the enslaved people perished in the violent waves. The remainder were resold into slavery in the Western Cape.

The São José wreck site is located between two reefs, a location that creates a difficult environment to work in because it is prone to strong swells creating challenging conditions for the archaeologists. To date, only a small percentage of the site has been excavated; fully exploring the site will take time.

Even the smallest artifact gives a clue into the shipwreck's story:

- **1980s:** Local amateur treasure hunters discovered a wreck near Cape Town and mistakenly identified it as the wreck of an earlier Dutch vessel. They applied for a permit under the legislation of the time and had to report their findings.
- **2008–2009:** The Slave Wrecks Project (SWP) staff identified the São José as a target for location in its pilot project.
- **2010–2011:** Jaco Boshoff, the co-originator of SWP, served as lead archaeologist for Iziko and primary investigator for the São José project. He discovered the captain's account of the wrecking of the São José in the Cape archives. New interest was developed on the site. Copper fastenings and copper sheathing indicated a wreck of a later period, and iron ballast—often found on slave ships and other ships as a means of stabilizing the vessel—was found on the wreck.
- **2012–2013:** SWP uncovered an archival document in Portugal stating that the São José had loaded iron ballast before she departed for Mozambique, further confirming the site as the São José wreck. Archaeological documentation of the wreck site began in 2013.
- **2014–2015:** Some of the first artifacts are brought above water through a targeted retrieval process according to the best archaeological and preservation practices. Using CT scan technology because of the fragility of the site, the SWP identified the remains of shackles on the wreck site, a difficult undertaking because of extreme iron corrosion. Archival research locates a document in which a slave is noted as sold by a local sheikh to the São José's captain before its departure, definitively identifying Mozambique Island as the port of departure for the slaving voyage. Archival and archaeological prospecting work was launched in Mozambique and Brazil in order to identify sites related to the São José story for future research.
- **2015–ongoing:** Full archaeological documentation and retrieval of select items to help to tell of the São José wreck site continue; the search for descendant communities of Mozambicans from the wreck also continues.

A selection of artifacts retrieved from the São José wreck will be loaned by Iziko Museums and the South African government for display in an inaugural exhibition titled “Slavery and Freedom” at NMAAHC, opening fall 2016. Iziko Museums also plans an exhibition.

Memorial Service

On Tuesday, June 2, soil brought from Mozambique Island, the site of the São José’s embarkation, will be deposited on the wreck site by a team represented by divers from Mozambique, South Africa and the United States. A solemn memorial service will also be held close by and on shore honoring the 500 enslaved Mozambicans who lost their lives or were sold into slavery. SWP researchers, Cape Town dignitaries and delegations from the U.S. Consulate and South African government will attend the private ceremony.

Symposium

A daylong public symposium, “Bringing the São José Into Memory,” will be held June 3 featuring a series of panel discussions focusing on the wreck, the slave trade, slavery, history and memory. The panels will take place at the Iziko Museums’ TH Barry Lecture Theatre and feature discussions and performances by scholars, curators, heritage activists, artists, hip-hop musicians and slave descendants from various academic, heritage and religious institutions, including Iziko, St. George’s Cathedral, NMAAHC, George Washington University, Syracuse University, Brown University, University of Western Cape, Cape Family Research Forum among others.

Maritime Archaeology and Conservation Workshop

The week’s activities will also include a conservation workshop for archaeologists, researchers and museum professionals from Mozambique, Senegal and South Africa to learn techniques in conservation and care for marine materials. This workshop, co-taught by Boshoff and George Schwarz of the U.S. Naval Heritage Command, is an opportunity to advance professional training and capacity for individuals and institutions, a core component of SWP’s mission. Representatives from Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, Mozambique, and Cheik Anta Diop University in Dakar, Senegal, will join with Smithsonian and Iziko professionals in a dialogue about current and future research and searches in their respective regions.

Slave Wrecks Project History

Founded in 2008, SWP brings together partners who have been investigating the impact of the slave trade on world history. It spearheaded the recent discovery of the São José wreck and the ongoing documentation and retrieval of select artifacts. In addition, extensive archival research was conducted on four continents in six countries that ultimately uncovered the ship captain’s account of the wrecking in the Cape archives as well as the ship’s manifest in Portuguese archives. Core SWP

partners include George Washington University, Iziko Museums of South Africa, the South African Heritage Resource Agency, the U.S. National Park Service, Diving With a Purpose, a project of the National Association of Black Scuba Divers, and the African Center for Heritage Activities.

SWP, established with funding from the Ford Foundation, set a new model for international collaboration among museums and research institutions. It has been combining groundbreaking slave shipwreck investigation, maritime and historical archeological training, capacity building, heritage tourism and protection, and education to build new scholarship and knowledge about the study of the global slave trade.

About the National Museum of African American History and Culture

Scheduled for completion in fall 2016, the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture broke ground in February 2012 on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The 400,000-square-foot building is being built on a five-acre tract adjacent to the Washington Monument at a cost of \$540 million. While construction is moving forward, the museum is hosting public programs, organizing traveling exhibitions and producing books and recordings. Paul Gardullo, museum curator, is the museum's chief representative to SWP.

About Iziko Museums of South Africa

Iziko Museums of South Africa is a declared national heritage institution established as a flagship museum bringing together 11 museums under a single governance and leadership structure. Iziko is governed by a council appointed by the minister of arts and culture. The core mission of the institution is to manage and promote Iziko's unique combination of South Africa's heritage collections, sites and services for the benefit of present and future generations. www.iziko.org.za/

About George Washington University

George Washington University is private research university located in Washington, D.C. It is the largest institution of higher education in the District of Columbia. <http://www.gwu.edu/>. Based at the university, the Capitol Archaeological Institute aims to protect and preserve cultural heritage through advocacy programs and initiatives by using the multitude of diplomatic and governmental resources in the Washington, D.C., area.

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